

Postsecondary Success Starts in High School

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I wish Woody Allen's aphorism that 80 percent of success is showing up applied to the persistent problem of college remediation. More than half of incoming community-college students, and approximately 20 percent of incoming students at four-year institutions, are academically unprepared when they arrive on campus. Fewer than one in 10 students who enroll in remedial coursework in community college will attain a credential within three years. "Showing up" isn't enough, because those who enter developmental education in college struggle to complete. This is particularly troubling given that community colleges and regional public universities are the points of entry for a large number of traditionally underrepresented students.

A Springboard to College

Dual-enrollment courses are growing in popularity as a way to encourage students to take the leap earlier.

So why wait until college to catch students up academically? We need to add a new chapter in our student-success playbook, and it should happen in high school. By waiting until college to remediate, we are doing a disservice to the students who need the most support. This is an issue of equity and economics — we must do better.



Over the last decade, many states and communities have doubled down on acceleration strategies for high-school students, such as expanded dual-enrollment and early-college opportunities, rightly recognizing that providing students with a jump-start on their postsecondary career can pay long-term dividends. This "speed up" strategy is vital and must continue; however, it is only one part of the answer.

We also need a concentrated effort to "catch up" students who are further behind and have yet to demonstrate postsecondary readiness in high school. According to [data from ACT](#) and states' own assessments, only about one-third of high-school students are performing at college-ready levels by the end of 11th grade. This gap represents an opportunity to build focused programs that tackle preparation before students graduate high school.

I am not suggesting this is a problem for only schools to solve; we in higher education have a vested interest in the preparation gap, and we must be equal partners in closing that gap. I work with a growing coalition of presidents, chancellors, and trustees across the country called [Higher Ed for Higher Standards](#), which has stepped forward to acknowledge the role of postsecondary systems and institutions in collaborating with high schools to align expectations and programs. Higher Ed for Higher Standards has identified "speed up" and "catch up" work as one of the most consequential ways to increase access and success. [A recent brief](#) on the topic identifies promising practices, including:

Early assessments of college readiness. Over the last several years, states have taken great strides to align public-school expectations with college entry-level coursework and to upgrade high-school assessments to be better measures of college readiness. Many 11th-grade tests now have "college ready" score levels validated by higher education. Those tests should be used to identify which students need extra support in high school to be successful in college.

12th-grade transition courses. Being armed with college-readiness data in 11th grade provides a golden

opportunity to rethink the senior year. Colleges should work with high schools to co-develop and deliver courses that provide developmental content to students who are not yet college ready. That will allow students to catch up before they graduate, and they will enter college ready for credit-bearing coursework.

Revised placement policies. If the 12th-grade courses and corresponding learning outcomes are aligned with gateway college courses and there is sufficient confidence in their delivery, colleges should agree to enroll students who successfully complete those courses into credit-bearing courses.

We don't need to start from scratch. There already exist model catch-up programs and policies that systems and institutions can learn from: California State University at Long Beach has pioneered a partnership to [deliver bridge courses](#) to close student-readiness gaps; Illinois has passed legislation requiring the development of [transitional math courses](#) across the state; and Tennessee has [increased the scale](#) of its Seamless Alignment and Integrated Learning Support, or Sails, program from a single district in 2012 to over 17,000 students statewide in the 2016-17 school year.

Just showing up doesn't work for students — and it doesn't work for colleges. We will not meet our long-term attainment goals or close equity gaps unless we change. The time is ripe to place a greater premium on our partnerships with schools to help catch up millions of students so that they not only show up, but show up ready to realize higher-education success.

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